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Thank you for the introduction, and for the lunch. I am pleased to be with you today. I am especially pleased that I'm scheduled to speak to you after lunch. You and I know, because of our work, that a person cannot perform on an empty stomach. I am here to talk to you today about the Department of Agriculture's efforts to fill the empty stomachs in our country. And about our efforts to fill stomachs with good, nutritious food.

For a long time, the domestic feeding programs -- food stamps, child nutrition, WIC, school lunch and breakfast, elderly feeding -- were viewed as an ugly step-child in the USDA. They were viewed as interlopers -- welfare efforts rather than programs appropriate to the farmer's department. There was little recognition of the enormous value of these programs to the farm economy.

Well, the millennium hasn't dawned, but we've taken out papers on the child. President Carter told us in a recent speech that food is a basic human right. Secretary Bob Bergland has stressed his commitment to the food stamp and child nutrition programs again and again in testimony, on television and in speeches. Perhaps nothing reveals that commitment as much as his statement that he purposely hired some of the best known advocates of food assistance programs. He wanted people who were experienced and knowledgeable to make these programs successful. The presence of Bob Greenstein, Lew Straus, and Christine Van Lenten is pretty strong testimony to the Secretary's concern.

Address by Carol Tucker Foreman, Assistant Secretary for Food and Consumer Services, before the Annual Meeting of the Society for Nutrition Education, at the Shoreham Americana Hotel, Washington, D.C., July 13, 1977

The old indifference and hostility are gone. They've been replaced by a strong commitment by all of us at the Department, from Secretary Bergland to Deputy Secretary John White and myself. They've been replaced by a sense of urgency to make these programs do the job that was intended efficiently and effectively.

Since coming to the Department, we have taken a number of steps that demonstrate that commitment.

First, we have proposed major reform of the food stamp program. It will eliminate the purchase requirement, set a standard deduction, and tighten administration of the program.

Second, we have expressed our view that a balanced diet of fresh foods is the best source of adequate nutrition. For example:

(a) We vetoed the continued use of a fortified milk drink as an alternative to snack programs;

(b) We will soon propose to end the use of "formulated grain/fruit products." We will provide a period of public comment on this.

Third, we will solicit comments on whether to rule out of the WIC program cereals with high sugar content or artificial colorings or flavorings.

Fourth, the Secretary has announced that we support restricting the sale of junk foods that compete with the school lunch program.

Fifth, in the coming year we will make efforts to tailor the foods donated to schools to the preferences of the children and to the food service personnel. When possible, fresh fruits and vegetables will be supplied.

(more)

Sixth, we will propose major revisions in the school lunch program.

Seventh, we have underway a complete review of the WIC program to increase its effectiveness and to reach the neediest people.

Eighth, we have just sent out a purchase order for frozen turkey rolls. And we have required that on the label the companies list the ingredients, that they give the percentage of each one and the purpose of each ingredient. It is an example of the way government can be used to lead the way. Government programs have a responsibility to set a standard and not be lagging behind.

This is the beginning. We'll take other, bigger steps. The easier things we try first. Hard steps take longer. We will try to set goals for where we would like to be, and then design or remodel programs to get us there.

Food assistance programs have not been the only unloved children at USDA. Basic research into human nutrition has been neglected. We know a lot more about how to feed a lactating cow than how to feed a lactating woman. We have not addressed human nutrition problems.

For example, there is criticism of the Recommended Daily Allowances. They cover only a few of the nutrients and the recommended levels are based on assumptions in some places. In other places there is only very sketchy data. There is also very little accurate data around about the true nutritional status of our population.

We don't know how widespread changes in eating patterns are. That makes it difficult to know what resources are necessary for an adequate diet.

We should develop new healthy ways to use the foods and fibers we now produce. We should develop new types of food to serve today's population better.

Finally, we don't have adequate mechanisms to tell the people about new discoveries and new options in nutrition. It doesn't help to hide new nutritional information under a bushel basket. And that brings me to the third step-child of USDA -- nutrition education.

We have not provided sufficient support to nutrition education. There are two reasons for this. First, there are still a lot of people who do not view nutrition as a subject for policy development. They see it as an everyday activity in which the average citizen is best left to his or her own devices. They seem to take the famous Clara Davis experiment and apply it out of context. Dr. Davis took a group of ten or twelve month old infants. She let them pick and choose among a range of foods as they wished. The kids balanced their own diets over a period of a month. The babies did an admirable job. So who needs nutrition education?

The secret, of course, is that there were no potato chips, colas and candy bars on the menu. They did not live in a powerful peer culture. They did not watch TV. No slick, attractive advertising reached their one year old eyes and ears. No fast food french fries beckoned to them. It was not the world of America today.

We're getting educated about food in this country. We're getting educated in a high power, high budget way. The way we eat is no accident. If we would have people eat wisely, good nutrition will have to compete as a good and attractive idea in the marketplace of ideas. We will have to use the same media that sells food. I hope we will do so and I have urged the Department to do so .

There is another reason why nutrition education hasn't gotten enough support, inside or outside of government. Education is a good way to avoid action. I used to work in family planning. There were always those who proposed -- "educate" people about sex and you won't have to provide them with the pill. Sex education was being offered then as an excuse not to offer or pay for a health service. Booklets and slide shows were less expensive and less controversial than clinics with doctors who would actually prescribe devices.

Then I worked as a consumer advocate. Consumer education was a "business buzz word." Consumer education was pushed as an excuse to avoid taking other action. You know the argument. If you educate people on how to be smart, rational, thrifty shoppers, you don't have to produce high quality products, or safe products. Consumer education was a good way to avoid regulations that outlaw fraud and deception.

Now I'm working with food and nutrition. I'm hearing a lot about the need for nutrition education. Is it being used as an excuse to avoid action?

We all know that nutrition education will not solve plate waste. We know nutrition education will not make certain our food is safe, or that poor people get enough food. Nutrition education will not make junk food nutritious. Nutrition education will not make up for the severe lack of basic nutrition research. Nutrition education will not make food cheaper. Nutrition education won't take the place of research and regulation and assistance and price competition. We must continue to support those programs.

Nutrition education can and must be an active force. Nutrition education has to be available where and when people need. Sure you can have it in classrooms, but you have to have it in the grocery store and the food stamp office and the welfare office and in the media. It has to be on television and radio and magazines and bus placards. And it has to be as appealing as its competition is. Nutrition educators must be an active force. People expect a lot from you.

You must take on hard issues. Handing out a list of the basic 4 isn't taking on a hard issue.

Ignoring areas where we don't yet have all the answers isn't taking on hard issues. Those areas don't have to be avoided. Educators can explain both sides of an issue and let people make a choice about fat and sugar and salt.

Those discussions don't have to be confined to experts. Educators should encourage that debate.

And nutrition educators should provide material and encourage debate about other hard issues -- about additives, and processing and advertising and competition in the food industry. If nutrition education is going to work, nutrition educators will have to be active in changing the food system. You'll have to pursue your views of how much sugar and salt and fat and advertising and competition.

And you'll have to deal with the most important question of all -- access to an adequate diet.

